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**Citation for published version:**

Desnain, V 2009, Sébastien et les femmes: Gender and Identity in the Crime Novels of Sébastien Japrisot. in M hurcombe & S Kemp (eds), *Sébastien Japrisot: The Art of Crime*. Faux titre, vol. 329 , Rodopi, Amsterdam, pp. 47-64.

**Link:**

[Link to publication record in Edinburgh Research Explorer](#)

**Document Version:**

Peer reviewed version

**Published In:**

Sébastien Japrisot

**Publisher Rights Statement:**

© Desnain, V. (2009). Sébastien et les femmes: Gender and Identity in the Crime Novels of Sébastien Japrisot. In hurcombe, M., & Kemp, S. (Eds.), Sébastien Japrisot. (pp. 47-64). (Faux titre). Amsterdam: Rodopi.

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Sébastien et les femmes:

## Gender and Identity in the crime novels of Sébastien Japrisot

VERONIQUE DESNAIN

The search for identity is at the heart of much of literature, but this is particularly true of the crime novel, in which the discovery of the identity of the criminal is usually the *raison d'être* of the narrative. In traditional crime genres, such as the 'mystery novel', this amounts to the simple fact of deducing who did it and how, with an occasional interest in the 'why' but only insofar as this helps to pinpoint the guilty party by revealing the motives for the crime. More recent crime fiction, however, is also interested by the motivations of the criminal in more profound ways. It seeks to understand the social and psychological set up which may lead an ordinary individual to break the law.

And then of course there is Japrisot... In his novels, solving the mystery and discovering the criminal is often not the primary concern, and in at least one case (*Piège pour Cendrillon*) the issue of 'who did it' is never satisfactorily resolved. Identity is the focal point of the investigation but the question being asked is not 'who did it?' It is 'who am I?' In many cases, the character asking this question is a woman who is posited, either by herself or by others, as guilty. So while female characters hold an important place in Japrisot's work, this prominence is often double-edged: the author puts them at the heart of the narrative and his heroines can be strong, active agents who fight back when attacked, intelligent and determined (in *La Dame dans l'auto*, Dany defeats Caravaille's attempt to implicate her, in *Piège pour Cendrillon*,

Mi/Do is not duped by Jeanne and others' attempts to manipulate her). Yet they could equally be described as neurotic, manipulative and selfish (Mi/Do, Eliane in *L'Été meurtrier*). Furthermore, they are as dangerous as they are seductive, suggesting a highly suspect – at least in feminist terms – hint of *femme fatale*.

This chapter will examine the ambiguity of the writer's presentation and I will refer, to a greater or lesser extent, to Japrisot's five 'crime' novels, *Compartiment tueurs*, *Piège pour Cendrillon*, *La Dame dans l'auto*, *L'Été Meurtrier* and *La Passion des femmes*, although I use the term 'crime novel' by default since it is a highly debatable and reductive term when applied to his work.<sup>1</sup>

It has been noted by critics that Japrisot's work hints, subtly but consistently, at social issues. Dubois states: 'Dans les failles de l'enquête judiciaire, [...] s'inscrit une autre enquête, de portée sociale.'<sup>2</sup> Although class issues also feature, it seems unavoidable, given the prominence of female characters in Japrisot's œuvre, that some of the social detail which enables the author to create credible characters will concern gender. I am reluctant here to talk about social 'criticism' since, as we will see, there is rarely any explicit denunciation of, or commentary on, the inequalities and problems exposed. Furthermore, I will argue that Japrisot is concerned first and foremost with a few recurrent notions, amongst which the most crucial is that of identity and, more precisely, the question of the construction of identity. Gender is

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<sup>1</sup> *Compartiment tueurs* and *L'Été Meurtrier* will only be alluded to briefly. The former because it is the most 'traditional' of Japrisot's crime novels, the latter because it has so far received much more attention from the critics than his other works. Full references to the editions used can be found in the bibliography.

<sup>2</sup> Jacques Dubois, *Le Roman policier ou la modernité* (Paris: Nathan, 1992), p.189. Further references to this text are given after quotations in the text.

undoubtedly an obvious and determining constituent of any individual's identity, and as such will be used by Japrisot as an element of characterization rather than as a distinct theme. As Dubois rightly states: 'le propos de l'investigation est moins d'établir une culpabilité que, pour la personne qui enquête, d'affirmer son identité' (p. 190), although arguably, in the case of Mi/Do, Dany and Éliane, the quest for identity is intimately linked to the notion of guilt. In Japrisot, guilt is linked to self perception and self worth, it helps make a clear distinction between legal culpability and guilt as a self-imposed position, whilst challenging accepted notions of justice.

This is clearly apparent in the statement which appears on the back of the Folio edition of *Piège pour Cendrillon* to tantalize and intrigue the potential reader: 'Mon nom est Michèle Isola. J'ai vingt ans. L'histoire que je raconte est l'histoire d'un meurtre. Je suis l'enquêteur. Je suis le témoin. Je suis la victime. Je suis l'assassin.' This is an interesting statement on two levels. First, the straightforward nature of the opening sentence is deceptive: the identity of the narrator is at the very heart of the intrigue, so the attentive reader might feel cheated as soon as this becomes apparent. But of course the veracity of this identification is put into doubt throughout the narrative and never fully established. The next two sentences seem factual and relatively trustworthy. The final four however open up a number of analytical possibilities. There is of course the obvious temptation to see them as a warning that this 'crime novel' will not play by the rules and deliver a traditional 'whodunit' (what Felman calls a 'récit policier dont la logique narrative est fondée sur sa propre auto-subversion').<sup>3</sup> Once we have started reading though, it could be assumed that all those statements may be dependent on the recovered identity of the narrator, in other words

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<sup>3</sup> Shoshana Felman, 'De Sophocle à Japrisot (via Freud), ou pourquoi le policier?', *Littérature*, 49 (1983), 23–42 (p.41).

that they may be true at different points in the narrative and become obsolete as new evidence is uncovered. Although, as pointed out above, the suspense this would suggest is rather defeated by the very first sentence of the statement.

Could it be, however, that they are all true at all times? That the narrator is the *enquêteur* is undeniable and this 'neutral' position is not affected by her identity, which is in any case, at least at the beginning, a blank slate. Similarly her role as *témoin* is fairly uncontroversial, although it is clear that, as an amnesiac, this witness is not so much unreliable as utterly useless. The final two definitions however open up the possibility, if we accept them as co-existing in a continuum, rather than as fluctuating and incompatible, that notions of guilt and responsibility can be entirely subjective, that the murderer could consider herself a victim (of society or circumstances, for example) or that the intended victim may feel guilt for being the catalyst for actions which cost the potential murderer her life. The reader may also be inclined to accept or reject the position adopted by the narrator according to their own perception of the implicit guilt of the victim: we may, for example, find excuses for a murderous Do driven to crime by the evident unfairness of her subordination to a less talented but socially and economically superior Mi. As stated by Dubois, 'Or, là où les deux romans [*Piège pour Cendrillon* and *Un Été meurtrier*] se donnent à lire comme représentations des conflits psychiques fondamentaux, l'on est incité à transposer leur sens intime à un tout autre plan, celui des rapports sociaux' (p. 194). Perhaps this observation could be extended to other Japrisot novels and be understood to concern issues of gender, as much as issues of class. Japrisot's female characters are, as we will see, particularly apt to illustrate the idea that identity is a social construct.

The five novels which will be mentioned in this chapter cover a period (1962

to 1986) particularly rich in social upheaval and change in France. Without going into too much detail, it is worth reminding ourselves of a few crucial dates in the social history of French women: 1965 marks a decisive turn in the legal perception of women as independent social beings. New laws give them the right to work without their husbands' permission and to administer their own financial affairs. The *Loi Neuwirth* decriminalises abortion in 1967 but it takes another eight years for the *Loi Veil* (1975) to make access to abortion a woman's choice. 1975 also sees laws on gender equality at work and divorce by mutual consent. Violence against women begins to be recognised as a social problem in the 1970s, with the first women's shelters appearing initially in the UK, soon followed by France. Although these shelters were often run by women themselves on a voluntary basis, with little support from official bodies at first, their very existence challenged a long-accepted view that domestic violence was an unfortunate side-product of marriage but essentially a personal matter that did not require legislation. Finally, it is only in 1980 that French law recognised rape as a crime rather than a misdemeanour (*délit*) and *viol conjugal* was not recognised until 1990.

Many of the issues mentioned above in their dryly historical context play a part in Japrisot's writing. It is sometimes a founding element of the narrative, from the rape which sparks Éliane's quest for revenge in *L'Été meurtrier* to Dany's conviction that her incomprehensible adventure is some sort of retribution for having had an abortion in *La Dame dans l'auto*. They are also used in more subtle ways, either to add emotional or historical authenticity or even, in typical Japrisot style, to mislead the reader in his or her attempts at deduction.

To take but one example of this strategy, the introductory chapter of *Compartiment tueurs* gives us a description of the notebook used by police

investigator Grazzi. The short paragraph lends itself to several readings: the third person, detached narrative, the very existence of the notebook in fact (a staple accessory of the procedural narrative), suggest a standard exemplar of detective fiction style, yet some of the information given is oddly personal: ‘Un petit carnet à reliure spirale, aux feuilles quadrillées, à la couverture rouge maculée de traces de doigts. Il avait coûté cent francs dans une papeterie de Bagneux, dont le patron buvait et battait sa femme’ (p. 16). The reader is at a loss to interpret the purpose of the intimate nature of the information given in the second part of the last sentence, which is no more commented upon than the economical and geographical detail given in the first part. One could argue of course that, with it, Japrisot brings to the forefront, without ever insisting on it, the cold reality of everyday domestic violence. However, we could also see this apparent non-sequitur as a clue in the investigation, at least from the point of view of the reader: it does not help plot progression directly but is highly suggestive, bringing to the reader’s mind a certain social logic to the dramatic events in focus: if the *papetier* routinely beats his wife and violence against women is commonplace and accepted as a fact of life,<sup>4</sup> much on the same level as the basic cost of a notebook, then the reader’s suspicion may immediately be aroused by male characters, since the victim was a woman: was the train victim killed by the man she rejected in the train corridor? By a jilted or jealous lover?<sup>5</sup>

As it turns out, of course, this is a dead-end, a passing comment by a narrator

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<sup>4</sup> The ‘normality’ of violence against women is also reflected in Filou’s notion that ‘s’il est simple et même recommandé, en cas de besoin, d’allonger une femme d’une tarte, on ne s’en tire pas avec un homme sans lui mettre la grosse tête.’ (*La Dame dans l’auto*, p. 101).

<sup>5</sup> This is compounded by the clichéd assertion made by the medical examiner that ‘les femmes n’étranglent pas, voilà tout’ (*Compartiment Tueurs*, p. 13).

who is omniscient but whose selection of the information he imparts to the reader brings us no closer to solving the murder. In the same way as he does a few pages previously in his presentation of the man who discovers the dead body ('Pierre, Bébé pour les copains, affichait des idées d'extrême gauche, pensait à une grève', p. 9), Japrisot gives us, under the guise of fleshing out marginal characters, snippets of social and gender conflicts which are incidental to the intrigue. In this tangential narrative, Japrisot hints at social conflicts and problematic issues without ever explicitly commenting on them, leaving the reader free to take them on board or forget them as soon as it becomes clear that they are not essential to the resolution of the intrigue.

Far more overt are the preconceptions developed by those who have seen the victim, either dead or alive. The detached narrative style, in keeping with traditional detective fiction, of the first chapter, which uses neutral descriptives ('l'homme', 'la femme', 'la victime', 'l'assassin', 'la femme était brune, jeune, plutôt grande, plutôt mince, plutôt jolie', 'les trois hommes en pardessus', 'l'homme au chapeau') quickly shifts to descriptions based on the investigating characters own, gendered, perceptions and assumptions. Because the victim was female and beautiful, it is assumed, by Grazzi, by his boss, and by Cabourg, that she must have led a fairly dissolute life which would explain her fate. Grazzi's boss asserts that 'une si jolie fille ne pouvait être victime que d'un crime passionnel' (p. 53), implying that her main attributes are physical, that she has no other qualities, either positive or negative, which could have led to her unfortunate demise. Of course, this is disproved by the revelation that she was involved in a lottery scam and that greed, rather than passion, was responsible for her death.

Even in first-person narratives, the psychological impact of society's gender



rules and expectations plays a large part in plot and character development. In *La Dame dans l'auto*, the fact that she had an abortion bears heavily on Dany's self perception and consequently on her responses to events. When Philippe hits her after discovering the gun and corpse in the car he stole from her, she sees it as 'une punition' (p. 138). Dany's abortion took place in Switzerland, a common recourse taken by French women in the 1950s and 1960s, and her sadness and guilt, feelings often experienced by women even with legal abortions, are compounded by the illegality of her position and the fear of likely social opprobrium to be expected should her past actions be revealed. Indeed, legal punishment was harsh for women who opted to have abortions in France, as exemplified by a passing remark in *Compartiment Tueurs*: 'il attendait assis sur un coin de table, pas la sienne, celle de Pardi, un Corse taciturne qui travaillait toujours tout seul et qui avait bouclé la veille une affaire d'avortement' (p. 62). It is symptomatic of the time that the same criminal investigators are dealing with abortion and murder cases. Fiction merely reflects the negativity of attitudes to abortion made evident by the name chosen by women, many of them famous, who agreed to put their name to a text advocating the legalisation of the procedure in 1971: it was called 'Le Manifeste des 343 salopes'.

Guilty in her own eyes, Dany, an orphan struggling to create an acceptable identity, to the extent of 'inventing' her name, is all too ready to accept that she may be responsible for a crime she cannot remember committing. Her self-loathing ('Je crois que je me déteste moi-même', p. 28) has led her to construct an alternative identity based on lies and distortions, leaving her open to the paranoid suspicion that she is no longer in control of her various 'selves'. For the reader, her assertion that 'je mens depuis que je respire' (p. 28) makes her an unreliable narrator, yet the glimpses she gives us of her personal history and, more importantly, of the way in which it

affects her self-perception ('La vérité, c'est qu'hier, aujourd'hui ou dans six mois, ce genre de choses devait m'arriver de toute façon. Je suis à moi seule une fatalité', p. 35) also leads us to view as suspect her acceptance that she may be guilty despite her inability to remember the specific facts of her crime. Her search for the truth is both triggered and endangered by an appraisal of herself which is in constant flux :

Je ne suis pas folle (p.25)

Je suis folle, je vais devenir folle (p.26)

On me prend pour une folle (p.26)

Ironically, it is this unstable/uncertain identity that Dany must reclaim in order to establish her innocence and make her assertion that 'c'est l'autre la coupable' (p.27) become a reality. Dubois's comment about Éliane and Mi/Do could equally be applied to Dany; 'Mais elles cherchent tout autant la solution d'une énigme: lorsqu'elles sauront qui a commis le crime, elles sauront qui elles sont' (p. 195). Indeed for Dany, finding out 'who did it' relieves her of the burden of guilt, perhaps not only for the murder, but also for her own perceived transgressions. This may be one interpretation of the rather trite (and possibly quite ironic) ending which finally makes an honest woman out of her and give her a new (final?) identity as 'wife of'.

In Japrisot then, the personal experiences of the characters, and their interpretation of these, are crucial to the tone and tenor of the narration. It is clear that the complexity and ambiguity of many of Japrisot's novels owe much to the polyphonic nature of the narrative. All but one of the crime novels (*Compartment tueurs*) present multiple narrative voices, producing a variety of effects. The different versions of a single event presented in first-person narrative clearly show the

subjectivity of the witnesses, who contradict each other, while the occasional intrusion of an extradiegetic voice further undermines the witness accounts. In *L'Été Meurtrier*, *La Dame dans l'auto* and *Piège pour Cendrillon*, this impression is compounded by information given in the form of chapter headings which may challenge the veracity of our analysis or of the characters' statements.

The 'je' in *Piège pour Cendrillon* is particularly problematic. In the first chapter, it does not seem associated with any of the characters since we are reading a third-person narrative. The use of the verb 'assassiner' in the indicative suggests that in most chapters, the amnesiac character accepts that a crime has occurred as well as her own culpability. Yet in the second chapter, the first-person narrator is told, and accepts, that she is Michèle Isola but also that she was the victim of an accident. The intrusion of the conditional in the third chapter seems to put into question the very existence of a murder. It is however in this chapter that the suspicion that the fire which disfigured her may not have been accidental is raised and that the identity of the narrator is also challenged when she instinctively signs 'Domenica Loi', implying that she could be either the victim or the criminal. Finally, the chapter in the future is narrated by Jeanne, suggesting perhaps that another crime is about to be committed: getting the wrong person accused by stripping her of her identity.

The issue of whether the 'je' of the chapter headings is also the narrator of each chapter or a constant (Mi/Do) further confuses the complicated investigation into Mi/Do's identity and allows a multiplicity of readings. The fact that the question 'who am I?', and therefore 'who did it?' is never satisfactorily answered is enough to point to the fact that, while Japrisot uses the crime as a basis for narratives, resolution is not his primary aim. In this instance, the effect produced by the shift in narrative voices and extradiegetic elements lead to an interrogation of the nature of identity and guilt

and suggests that the former is elusive and the latter a matter of perception.

The multiplicity of voices challenges the same notions in *L'Été meurtrier* and defies a number of preconceptions linked to gender in *La Passion des femmes* (a title which already proposes antagonistic readings). Interestingly it is not necessarily in the truth of what the many voices tell us that the social fracture is exposed, but rather in their contradictions and denials, in the overlap of subjectivities to which only the reader has access, as well as in the information that only an omnipresent third-person narrator can provide.

This is particularly striking in *La Passion*, in which all but one of the multiple voices are female (the introduction and the conclusion which frame the witnesses and lawyer's accounts are in the third person). Although the book was written in 1986, it is set in a fairly indeterminate period covering World War Two and the fifteen years or so that followed. Together those two elements give us a narrative that touches on a number of issues which were at the forefront of both social changes and feminist struggles from the 1960s onwards and it could be argued that this gives the reader a fairly broad understanding of the roots of women's struggle for equality. However, as Dubois rightly points out in his chapter on *Piège* and *L'Été meurtrier*, the prevalence of female characters does not necessarily imply a feminist slant. He states:

Nous sommes loin de croire que Japrisot dans ses deux romans n'ait d'autre propos que féministe. Cendrillon n'en reste pas moins Cendrillon et le piège se referme sur elle. Plus d'un fantasme machiste entoure son image. Et l'on ne s'étonne pas vraiment que l'écrivain nous donne, en 1986, *La Passion des femmes*, roman d'un collectionneur qui, s'il maintient l'idée d'utopie, va vers celle, toute privée et personnelle, du harem. A ce stade l'énigme ne se pose

plus à la femme; elle est celle de la féminité, telle qu'inlassablement  
reconduite par l'homme. (p. 203-4)

Indeed, *La Passion* reads like a role call of iconic figures of fantasy: the newly-wed, the prostitute, the nymphomaniac headmistress, the film star, the exotic Japanese girl, the nurse, the twins, the virgin. This is, of course, confirmed by Japrisot's own comment on the novel: 'Caroline, la maîtresse d'école qui montre ses jambes pour punir ensuite, voilà le fantasme masculin numéro un.'<sup>6</sup>

Nonetheless the whole host of voices in the first-person narrative enables us to see how each of these women constructs her own identity and invites us to enter her own subjective reality. There are dissonant notes which dispel any superficial reading of their witness accounts as mere male indulgence and Japrisot seems to be deconstructing and exposing the fallacy of the very fantasies he is exploiting.

One example of this is Belinda's account of prostitution as a rather civilised and luxurious activity, which is immediately put into question by the next witness, Zozo, who gives a rather more realistic, not to say sordid, version of the same events. This version is reiterated and amplified later in the novel by Michou's comments: 'C'était le boxon le plus minable qu'on ait jamais vu [...], une infâme boîte à soldats' (p. 431).

Similarly, the idealistic view of marriage as a union based on love offered by the references to the faithful Constance is rather at odds with the testimony given by Emma. Her account of the sexual harassment which led to her marriage suggests that matrimony is in many cases little more than legal prostitution. She makes it clear that economic pressures were the sole basis for her consent: 'Je ne sais si on peut encore le

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<sup>6</sup> <http://www.figuresdestyle.com/japrisot/jardin/inter.htm>

comprendre aujourd'hui, c'était l'époque du marasme économique, des grèves, du chômage. Mes parents, qui m'ont eu très tard, étaient vieux et sans ressources. J'avais peur de ne plus trouver de travail' (p. 58). Marriage is seen as a transaction in which women are 'bought', in exchange for financial security and respectability: 'c'est lui qui l'a exigé. Pour m'avoir toute à lui' (p. 58). This is accompanied by a possessiveness which reduces women to the status of 'merchandise' owned by their spouses: 'c'est lui [mon mari] qui a porté une main sur mon genou, avec une détermination de propriétaire' (p. 24).

Assuming that Emma is not an isolated case, the lot of married women therefore appears to be dire, although the proprietary stance is clearly not reserved for marriage if we trust Filou's attitude in *La Dame dans l'auto*:

En fait elle avait très bien compris, il ne répéta pas la question. Ce qu'elle ne comprenait pas, c'est pourquoi il la posait, car cela ne répondait guère à son personnage, et aussi pourquoi, brusquement, elle ne reconnaissait plus tout à fait son visage fermé, ses yeux qui se détournaient. Il voulait savoir à combien d'hommes avant lui elle avait appartenue – c'était le terme qu'il avait employé. (p. 118)

The remarks that precede and follow the reported speech suggests that his female interlocutor, Dany, is conscious of the incongruity of the term. The reader is even more alert to it given his access to Filou's 'inner thoughts' and his conviction that:

Il jugeait que les femmes, qui sont, par naissance, de condition inférieure et ne demandent pas en général de grands efforts cérébraux, étaient la compagnie la

plus souhaitable pour un garçon comme lui, qui avait besoin de manger deux fois par jour, de faire l'amour de temps en temps et d'atteindre Marseille avant le 14 du mois.(p. 98)

Nonetheless, Dany is free to leave, whereas marriage is presented as more binding, and the contrast between Emma's and Zozo's situations hints at the possibility that prostitutes enjoyed more freedom than married women: we are told that Zozo 'avait abandonné ses économies de dix ans pour racheter sa propre personne à celui dont elle était la propriété' (p. 420). No such option would have been available to Emma since, until 1965, her finances would have been administered by her husband.

Through the specific details of the first three chapters and the interplay between the witness accounts, Japrisot highlights the extent to which the fantasy, or in the case of the newly-wed, the idealised notion, clashes with reality. I would argue that the next witness statement, Caroline's, could, despite its humour, be read as an indictment of the consequences of confining women to the whore/virgin stereotypes suggested by the preceding chapters. The nymphomaniac schoolmistress may be every boy's dream, but her self-deluded monologue enables us to perceive the roots and mechanisms of her 'affliction'. Her rape fantasies, her constant denial of her own knowledge and desires point to a deeply suppressed sensuality which can only express itself through neurotic obsession. This, as well as Emma's remark regarding her arousal at the sight of Christophe and Lison ('On prétend les femmes peu sensibles à un tel spectacle. Vous le savez comme moi, c'est sûrement un homme qui a dit ça', p. 53), points to a wide-spread repression of female sexuality and goes against the notion

that women can only be passive and submissive recipients of male desire.<sup>7</sup>

A typical example of this assumption about the non-existence of female desire is the old-fashioned Malignaud, who, far from suspecting the real basis for Emma's reaction (a purely physical response to 'une secousse du lacet [...] m'a fait reculer la tête et fermer les yeux.', p. 29) to the announcement that the escaped prisoner was accused of 'viol et meurtre', reads it according to his own preconceptions: 'L'adjudant-chef [...] a pris cela pour la réaction d'une jeune épouse encore traumatisée par sa première étreinte' (p. 29). An implicit link between the rape and the *nuit de nocés* is clearly present in the mind of the *adjudant*, who cannot imagine that a wedding night could be anything but traumatic for the bride since he cannot envisage female desire as anything other than perverse.

The assumption of passivity and the objectification of women are also clearly criticized in Frou-Frou's exposition of the workings of the film industry. The titles of Frou-Frou's 'oeuvres' (*Neck, Eyes, Lips, Legs*) are reductive to the extreme but, associated with the brief summary of plot offered by the actress, also reveal the hypocrisy which makes the presentation of women as active agents acceptable only if it is mitigated by another stereotype: that of the self-sacrificing mother. In every film, the heroine justifies her actions (sexual encounters, theft, etc) with the leitmotif 'pour nourrir son gosse'. This vision of women reduced to their maternal role is also emphasised in the discussion of the forgotten film title (*Le Calvaire d'une mère!, La femme abandonnée!, La mère abandonnée!* p. 233). Jicks concludes: 'La mère, la femme, c'est pareil' (p. 234). The irony of Frou-Frou's repetitive scenarii mocks both the unimaginative melodrama of main stream cinema (let's not forget that Japrisot

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<sup>7</sup> Throughout I refer to the principal male protagonist as Christophe, despite the many pseudonyms he also adopts, as this is the name finally attributed to him by his lawyer.



was also a film writer) and the notion of what constitutes the female role. Against this notion of female desire as non-existent or dictated by reproductive or economic imperatives, Japrisot offers a more egalitarian view. He stated: ‘Je me suis plongé dans des livres de psychologie car je voulais faire appel à la fois aux fantasmes des femmes et à ceux des hommes.’<sup>8</sup>

For women, those *fantasmes* may be sexual but they are also based on the need to be perceived as something other than a commodity:

ce jeune homme est tel que chacune des héroïnes le rêve. Il n'y a qu'un dénominateur commun à l'image qu'elles ont de lui: la tendresse et la douceur. Il est tout le contraire d'un macho et c'est sans doute pour cela qu'elles se sont dit : ‘J’adore ce garçon-là.’<sup>9</sup>

Nonetheless, sexuality itself is presented as a source of conflict rather than as intimacy or a *rapprochement* between the sexes. Women use it to defy men’s proprietary instinct, as does Emma when she tries to convince Vincent to sleep with her, after telling him about the harassment that led to her marriage, with the words: ‘Venge-moi! Punissons-le!’ (p. 58). When they experience pleasure, they may be afraid to express it for fear of bolstering the male sense of superiority. Thus Zozo, the prostitute, explains:

Il y a des moments, c’est plus fort que vous, on peut pas s’empêcher [...] chaque fois, d’ailleurs, j’avais beau serrer les dents pour cacher ma misère, le

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<sup>8</sup> In the interview cited above.

<sup>9</sup> In the interview cited above.

zigue s'en est aperçu. J'avais honte de voir la lueur maligne qui s'allumait dans son œil [...] Une pute doit garder sa fierté. (p. 139)

Caroline, meanwhile is both contemplating the possibility of rape as something in which she could take pleasure and dreaming about it. It is clear in her case that such a removal of responsibility would finally enable her to give in to her repressed desires, without risking her reputation as a *veuve honorable* (p. 186).

It seems therefore that Japrisot's aim is not just to present an array of fantasy female icons, but to set them each in a context in which our initial perception of them based on basic information and preconceptions (she's a *femme respectable*, a prostitute, etc) is subtly (or sometime not so subtly) undermined by their own perception of themselves and an exposition of the restrictions and mechanisms which dictate their behaviour. Inevitably at the root of their behaviour is their relationship, in the wider social sense, with men. The power of social and gender hierarchy is made very clear by its comparison with military hierarchy: when Kowalski is challenged by Michou for not speaking out after he witnessed the murder of which Christophe is accused, he states: 'Et puis, qui on aurait cru, le sous-off ou moi?'. When Michou is in turn challenged by the lawyer, her reply suggests that she knows that her own status would have made her suspect as a witness: 'Qui on aurait cru?... Une pute?' (p. 439). While it may be argued that in Michou's case, her profession was the problem, Emma's response when asked why she tolerated her boss's harassment makes it clear that even the word of 'respectable' women is unlikely to be given more value than that of a man: 'Qui croirait-on, lui ou moi? Je passerais pour une petite hystérique, c'est tout' (p. 57–58).

The female characters' lack of trust seems rather justified by the male characters' responses to and attitudes toward women. Male solidarity is portrayed in a very negative way: it is usually directed against women and reinforces our impression that they are objectified and perceived as disposable consumables. Marie-Martine complains that, while she was interned in a mental hospital, 'la nuit, des infirmiers entraient dans ma chambre et me tourmentaient. Quelquefois ils étaient deux, quelquefois trois... Évidemment, personne ne m'a crue. Ils se tiennent tous' (p. 387). We are forced to wonder whether the 'tourment' was sexual abuse and whether the 'ils' refers to hospital authorities or men in general.

Another episode in *La Passion des femmes* suggests that even a sympathetic character such as Christophe may choose to bond with other men at the expense of women, oblivious to the suffering they have or could have inflicted; when he leaves Emma bound and gagged in the forest, she becomes the target of an attempted rape by a game keeper. Christophe reappears just in time to save Emma, injuring the *garde-chasse*. The man is in fact still wearing a neck brace when they meet up again several months later. After an initial fight, the two men become friends. Frou Frou senses that what opposed them was 'une histoire d'hommes'. Although she is never let in on the details of the story, Frou-Frou understands that their amusement when referring to it is a clear indication of the place of women in the two men's lives, as legitimate prey but also as interchangeable and ultimately of little worth. She bitterly remarks: 'Le gibier qui les avait opposés était une femelle et portait des bas de soie. Pour un lapin, ils ne se seraient jamais réconciliés' (p. 254).<sup>10</sup>

In *Compartiment Tueurs*, Cabourg hopes that a comparable mechanism will

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<sup>10</sup> This scene can be read as an 'homage' to Jean Renoir's film *La Règle du jeu* (1939), a comedy of manner satirising French bourgeois life.

enable him to be seen by the police as an equal rather than a suspect: he intends to tell them of his attempt at seduction and consequent rejection:

Il glisserait très vite sur l'incident, avec un petit sourire, en secouant la tête, l'air de penser: 'Ces femmes, quand même.'

Il dirait: 'Ces gonzesses, quand même.' Il dirait: 'On était là, tous les deux, seuls dans le couloir. Elle avait l'air engageante. Vous savez ce que c'est. On sent ça. Je l'ai un peu pelotée. Vous savez ce que c'est. C'est vraiment dommage, entre parenthèses, une fille si bien roulée qui se fait estourbir comme ça... Bref, elle est montée sur ses grands chevaux et je suis allé me coucher.'

Il passerait vite à autre chose. Ce serait une plaisanterie, entre hommes, rien de plus.' (p. 45)

The implications of his choice of presentation and vocabulary are clear. They refer in a few words to women as seductive yet irrational; 'on sent cela' could suggest that he is imagining this supposed seduction yet his intent is clearly to suggest that she was giving mixed signals and that her reaction to his advances was at odds with her previous behaviour. 'Vous savez ce que c'est' hints all at once at a supposedly common male compulsion to possess and at women's refusal to play their part. Yet Cabourg is consistently presented as a shy and socially awkward man who may think that 'real men' behave in this way but is incapable of performing even this simulacrum of masculinity since 'il savait qu'il ne pourrait pas tenir ce rôle, employer ces mots' (p. 45). What Cabourg misses, perhaps as much as success with women, is the complicity with other men which he could gain through female conquests.

So it is clear that while Japrisot appears to create an idealised male figure in Christophe, the general impression he gives of men is far from uniformly positive. This is interesting because, as has often been remarked, many aspects of his own life contribute to his characterisation, so that it is easy to draw parallels between the writer and his main male protagonists. Yet it would perhaps be wrong to stop there. Japrisot himself stated in an interview that:

[*La Passion des femmes*] est le livre où j'ai mis le plus de moi-même. Je ne raconte que ce que je connais. Et la seule personne qu'on connaisse bien, c'est soi. Si j'ai trouvé plus astucieux de parler de moi à travers des personnages féminins, c'est qu'ainsi je suis doublement insoupçonnable.<sup>11</sup>

So, while the author also explains the predominance of female characters in a way likely to make any feminist despair ('J'aime beaucoup les femmes, ou plutôt, j'aime la Femme'), this reductive idealisation is perhaps tempered by a degree of identification.

The ambiguity of Japrisot's presentation clearly lends itself to subjective interpretation on the part of the reader: we may choose to read *La Passion* as a succession of events and fantasy tableaux or we may prefer to listen to each individual narrative voice and take note of the sentiments, and sometimes frustration, expressed by the female narrators, of the *faillite* revealed by conflicting perspectives.<sup>12</sup> The

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<sup>11</sup> In the interview cited above.

<sup>12</sup> This is perhaps best exemplified by Dubois's reading of another female 'Cette Mi endosse ici le rôle de *la jeune femme moderne* et libre mais qui s'en trouve désaxée, c'est-à-dire fantasque, instable, immature' (p. 198). Yet this causal link is not suggested in Japrisot. There is no clear implication that

prevalence of gender preconceptions seeps through in *La Passion des femmes*, to the extent that it is often internalised by women themselves. Marie-Martine, for example, identifies her lifestyle as male because of her affairs and her emotional detachment from her partners: ‘j’eus mes aventures, un peu comme un garçon. Quand l’amour était fade, je m’en allais’ (p. 389). The novel exposes both the rigidity and the fallacy of the roles imposed upon women and ultimately reveals the danger of those models with the murderous figure of Malignaud, who makes the mistake of projecting his own fantasies of purity and possession onto Pauline. His final words to his victim: ‘Je te croyais différente des autres! Différente!’ (p. 437) recalls the dichotomy which opens the novel. Having previously thought her ‘pure et innocente’ (p. 161), Malignaud’s inflexible preconceptions leave him unable to accept reality: if the woman he loves is not a virgin, then she can only be a whore, as are most women to Malignaud’s mind. The only solution for him is to destroy the real woman in order to preserve the illusion.

The last chapter of course reveals the entire novel to be the musing of a script writer and, in this respect at least, the ‘Harem’ theory holds a degree of truth. Yet, Shoshana Felman’s comment on *Piège pour Cendrillon* could in a sense be applied to *La Passion des femmes*:

Ce bref dénouement, en raison même de sa sécheresse elliptique, invite à un

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Mi is ‘unhinged’ because of her lifestyle *as a woman*, that her temperament has been altered by anything other than the indulgence and wealth she has been granted since birth. In fact, the image we are given of Mi, while it can be seen as critical, could be situated more easily in the context of a critique of class than as a negative comment on ‘liberté des mœurs’. Perhaps we can see in the critic’s analysis a reflection of social expectations.

examen attentif qui admet – on le découvre – plusieurs lectures successives.

Or, ces lectures sont de telle nature que leur diversité ne se cumule pas; loin de s'additionner l'une à l'autre, elles se renversent l'une l'autre. (p. 29)

While it appears to solve the mystery on the surface, the questions it has raised about the subjectivity and fluidity of identity remain. Even if we accept that the gallery of women created by the anonymous final narrator is little more than a self-indulgent fantasy, we cannot ignore the fact that the narrative tone of *La Passion des femmes* reflects, not just the illusion of women as they are fantasized by men, but also the historic reality of evolving gender relations in the post-war period. Perhaps more importantly, the first person narrative in this, and other novels, forces us to consider the subjectivity of discourse, to confront our own preconceptions, our assumptions about guilt and justice. Japrisot's novels offer more than a mere enigma to be solved or even a thinly disguised social critique, as is the case with most crime writing. The mysteries he probes are rather more metaphysical and are never unraveled, but merely exposed. In what could perhaps be described as the most frustrating configuration for a crime reader, Japrisot's narratives ask many questions but never provide definite answers.

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